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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN HUNGER STRIKE GATHERS SUPPORT AND
CRITICISM

REF: A. TUNIS 1294
[1](#)B. TUNIS 1248
[1](#)C. TUNIS 1340
[1](#)D. TUNIS 1329

Classified By: CDA Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During PolOff,s October 9 visit, opposition Progressive Democratic Party Secretary General Maya Jribi and former Secretary General Nejib Chebbi indicated that their hunger strike (which began on September 20) will continue at least until November 7, the 20th anniversary of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's assumption of the Tunisian presidency in [1](#)1987. Nineteen days into their hunger strike, Jribi,s and Chebbi,s health appeared stable, although doctors have advised them to cease their hunger strike. The hunger strikers told PolOff that more civil society activists will join the strike on October 20, and the group plans to stage a sit-in on October 23 (the day by which a Tunisian court ruled they must vacate their office space). Meanwhile, GOT and representatives of loyal opposition parties are publicly and directly criticizing the hunger strike. End Summary.

Health Update

[1](#)2. (C) Opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Secretary General Maya Jribi and former Secretary General

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Nejib Chebbi began a hunger strike on September 20 to protest political repression in Tunisia (Ref A). The hunger strikers, health remains precarious. As the hunger strike finishes its third week, both Jribi and Chebbi are noticeably frail. Chebbi told Poloff on October 9 that he had consented to an IV drip for a period over the weekend, and the same would probably soon be necessary for Jribi. The PDP published a press release on October 7 noting Dr. Fethi Touzri's assessment that Jribi and Chebbi should be hospitalized, but both told PolOff they will remain in the PDP headquarters until forcibly evicted and will continue the hunger strike.

Efforts to Reach Out to the Grassroots

[1](#)3. (C) On October 6 and 7, PDP supporters attempted to

deliver signed petitions of support to fifteen regional governors. According to Jribi, there was a heavy police presence surrounding each location, and none of the delegations were able to deliver their petition. One group reportedly managed to enter the premises of a governor's office, but according to Chebbi the governor called the police to escort the party off the grounds. The PDP next plans to hold regional demonstrations, followed by a national demonstration if possible (likely on or around November 7). (Note: We do not expect the GOT to grant permits for such activities, which would therefore be short-lived. End Note.)

When PolOff mentioned an upcoming Embassy event, Chebbi opined that if it was after November 7 (the anniversary of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's assumption of the Tunisian presidency in 1987) he and Jribi would be able to attend. Thus, it seems both hope to continue the hunger strike until November 7 as initially announced.

14. (C) Chebbi and Jribi reiterated their commitment to non-violent means of protest. Chebbi added that at the moment three additional members of civil society plan to join the hunger strike on October 20. While he did not name names, he did hint that former members of the October 18 movement (itself launched by a hunger strike in which Chebbi took part) would be involved. Potential candidates could be Ayachi Hammami (Ref B), an October 18 hunger striker and president of the PDP hunger strikers, solidarity committee, and Lotfi Hajji, another October 18 hunger striker and president of the unrecognized Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate. Jribi said that while specific individuals such as Hajji are often stopped and prevented from visiting the hunger strikers, in general visitors do not have problems accessing the building.

15. (C) On October 1, a Tunisian court ordered the PDP and its weekly newspaper "al-Mowqif" to vacate their office space

by October 23 (Ref C). The PDP plans to stage a sit-in on this date. Chebbi added that since the PDP feels its eviction is politically motivated (Ref D), they are open to a compromise that allows them to stay in their current location, but have not been contacted by their landlord. Chebbi and Jribi opined that the PDP would even be willing to pay an additional fee or increased rent to remain at its current location. In an apparent change of heart, both opined that allowing the GOT to facilitate a move to a new location is tantamount to capitulation.

GOT Disapprobation

16. (C) On top of several negative opinion pieces in the Tunisian press after the Ambassador's September 28th call on Chebbi and Jribi, the GOT geared up in recent days to officially denounce the hunger strikers and the international attention they have attracted. Presidential Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia told a gathering of ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) supporters in Sousse that some political activists in Tunisia are spreading "tendentious rumors." President of the Chamber of Advisors Abdallah Kallel called on a similar group in Kairouan to "stand against detractors who spread false information" about Tunisia. Ben Ali's Chief of Staff Iyadh Ouederni told other party supporters that such individuals are trying "to ruin Tunisia's image."

Comment

17. (C) The GOT criticism combined with Jribi and Chebbi's firm stance suggest there is little hope the eviction order will be resolved non-confrontationally. It increasingly appears that the expected October 23 eviction may result in a violent clash between PDP officials and supporters and GOT security forces. If that comes to pass, an official

statement from Washington to express our concern about the lack of respect for freedom of association may be warranted. For now, Post will continue to monitor the situation, and does not anticipate any major development (barring hospitalization of the hunger strikers) before October 20. End Comment.

DESJARDINS